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SEMINAR METHODS OF ECONOMIC INSTRUCTION: A SYMPOSIUM¹

THE SEMINAR: ITS ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS

The word seminar has a very un-American sound. Yet like so many other plants of exotic growth it has been successfully transplanted to American soil. Not only has it become thoroughly acclimatized; but with characteristic American energy, attempts are continually being made to foster its growth in places and under conditions entirely unsuited to its development. What is the real meaning of the seminar, what are its methods and its limitations?

The original home of the seminar, it is well known, is to be found in the ecclesiastical schools of the Middle Ages. The mediaeval "seminaries" were, as the word implies, veritable seed-plats, institutions in which the youthful would-be religious writer or teacher was taught to unfold the seed of doctrinal disputation, of theological acumen, and of pulpit eloquence. The mediaeval seminaries, however, like the mediaeval universities, were called upon to perform a twofold task. They were supposed on the one hand to impart to the students a comprehensive knowledge of particular topics, and on the other hand to teach them methods of special work. This latter part of their duties was gradually relegated to an inferior place in the institutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the theological seminaries of America it has until very recently played but a minor rôle; while the creation of general seminaries throughout the land, devoted solely to the ends of high-school education, has hopelessly discredited the word. A "seminary," in American parlance, has become a place where a not very high grade of secondary education can be received.

With the revival of interest in science in Germany there came a change. By science, I do not of course mean natural science. The philosophical, the political, the philological disciplines are assuredly as purely scientific as the mathematical or physical or

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biological. Not so very long ago it had become the fashion to denote by "science" simply the group of natural sciences, and to speak in a rather patronizing tone of the other domains of human knowledge. This was to be ascribed in part indeed to the presumption of the advocates of these youthful disciplines: in part also to the reaction against the philosophical mysticism and transcendentalism of the times. But the main reason, as I take it, was the one that especially concerns us here. These new disciplines—the natural sciences—prospered and grew strong chiefly because they laid hold of, and subserved to their ends, the important feature of the old mediaeval seminary idea. They transformed and assimilated this feature and converted it into the principle of original research, of laboratory work. The laboratory is the seed-plot of natural science. And it is to the immense and successful extension of laboratory work that we owe the marvelous development of natural science, and the frequent identification of natural science with science in general during a part of the nineteenth century. If the philosophical disciplines, in the larger sense of the word, were to retain anything of their pristine position, it would be absolutely necessary to quicken them into renewed life by the application of the same principle.

And thus it was that there came about, modestly enough at first, the employment of the seminar method in Germany. In the beginning used by a few eminent teachers of philology and history, it spread rapidly, until it has become today the very core of university work. The seminar is to the moral, the philosophical, the political sciences what the laboratory is to the natural sciences. It is the wheel within the wheel, the real center of the life-giving, the stimulating, the creative forces of the modern university. Without it no university instruction is complete; with it, correctly conducted, no university can fail to accomplish the main purpose of its being.

The seminar may be defined as an assemblage of teacher with a number of selected advanced students, where methods of original research are expounded, where the creative faculty is trained and where the spirit of scientific independence is inculcated. Starting out from this definition it will be profitable to discuss in turn the

nature and methods of the seminar, its advantages, its dangers, and limitations.

The seminar is, in the first place, a peculiarly university feature, and an indispensable adjunct to true university work. The difference between the college and the university I take to be this: the college is the place where men are made; the university is the place where scholars are made. The college attempts to develop all the educational sides of a young man's character; the university confines itself primarily to one side. The college gives him an all-round training, it teaches him to think and to express himself, it acquaints him with the general trend of human knowledge, but it at the same time lays stress on his physical development and to a certain extent on his ethical development; the college wants to turn out true men, gentlemen—men in attainments, in manners, in physique. The most successful college is the one that best combines all these various duties. As Cicero expressed it, the college is to give the education befitting the gentleman. The university on the other hand has quite different aims and purposes. With general all-round knowledge it has nothing to do; for the candidate for university degrees is expected to have already received this general groundwork of training. With physical and ethical or religious training the university has still less to do. Its students are men, not boys: men with serious objects in view, who have neither the leisure for, nor the necessity of, frittering away their time in athletic pursuits: men whose ethical and religious nature is presumed to have been developed so that they need no further tutelage or moral supervision from their lay preceptors. To sum it up in a word, the college is the place for general education; the university is the place for specialization. In the college students are taught to imbibe; in the university they are taught to expound. In the college the goal is culture; in the university the goal is intellectual independence.

But how can this purpose of the university best be attained? The university lectures are indeed good so far as they go: but in themselves they do not fully accomplish the desired end. The university lecture is supposed to give the special student knowledge of his special work. The university professor who is worthy of the

name will afford his students what they cannot find in books: otherwise there would be no need of attending lectures. He will not only keep his classes informed as to the latest progress and recent thought in the particular field, but will endeavor to expound his own views, to mold the mass of existing knowledge of the topic into a plastic whole, and to shape it by the imprint of his scholarship and his convictions. The university student goes as often to hear the professor as to attend the course. The function of the university lecturer after all is, in the main, to present in compact form the actual condition of the subject; to show the seeker for truth how far the specialization of knowledge has advanced. Specialized information, particular knowledge—that is the watchword of the university lecture course.

But this in itself is only one-half, and in truth the lesser half, of university work. There remains the instruction in method, in original research, in critical comparison, in creative faculty. Mere knowledge of what others have done, while of supreme importance in preventing sciolism, will in itself never make a thinker. It may give erudition, but will never give method. Were university instruction confined to university lectures, the outlook for the perpetuation and advance of science would be dark indeed.

Let us ascertain, then, the advantages of the seminar. The advantages are twofold: the advantages to the student; the advantages to the instructor.

In the first place we must note the creation of ties of friendship between the students. In the university, as opposed to the college, the students are as a rule unacquainted with each other. There are commonly no athletic sports, no secret societies, no organizations for mutual good fellowship to draw the students together. The university students come primarily to work, and have neither time nor inclination for these outside pursuits. They enter the lecture-room as strangers, and depart as strangers. The seminar, which collects the ablest and brightest students around one table, gives them an opportunity of gauging each other's abilities, of familiarizing each with the others' strong points, of laying the seeds of future collaboration in scientific or professional work. The value of such acquaintanceship cannot be overestimated. Everyone who has

worked in a seminar as a student will testify to the fact that he has carried with him not only pleasant memories but also the inspiration from stimulating arguments with his fellow-members. The seminar does in this respect for the better class of university students what the debating society and fraternity do for the college student.

In the second place we notice the increased familiarity with the recent literature. The average student will be content to follow his lecture and do nothing more. He desires to pass his examination, to attain his degree; and he imagines, generally correctly enough, that if he is thoroughly acquainted with his professor's exposition, he will somehow pull through. A few students may be so interested in the topic that they will voluntarily endeavor to supplement the lectures by an exhaustive course of outside reading. But they for the most part do not know either where to turn or how to begin. The seminar here again supplies the defect. It is a valuable practice to begin each seminar exercise with a half-hour devoted to the review of current periodical and other scientific publications. If each member, e.g., is assigned the periodical literature of some one country, not only will he be required thoroughly to familiarize himself with the current work in that language, but the whole seminar will thus have presented to it piecemeal the very latest stage of scientific inquiry. If to the review of periodical literature be added a critical review of the newest books, the members will soon find that their range is being extended and that their appetite for further work is being whetted.

In the third place, and most important, we note the knowledge of the methods of work.

This is the real *raison d'être* of the seminar. To teach the student how to handle his material and by interpretation or discovery to make a contribution to the store of existing knowledge, that is the real purpose of the seminar. The methods must to a certain extent differ according to the nature of the discipline. If the study be history, the method must of course consist primarily in a critical analysis and comment upon the sources, the documents. The members of the seminar try their hand in turn at interpretation and explanation, and have their endeavors

supplemented and rectified by the comments of the professor. To estimate at its true weight the value of historical material in the light of contemporary events and recent criticism is the most difficult task for the incipient historian to learn.

On the other hand, if the subject is political science or philosophy or philology, the methods must be a little different. Here the training must be, not in original material, but in the formulation and criticism of ideas. Take political economy, for example. The long and bitter contest between the two factions in economics now bids fair to be settled by mutual compromise. The more tolerant and wiser economists of today in all countries recognize that both the historical and the comparative method on the one hand, and the deductive method on the other are not only not mutually exclusive, but complementary; and that the use of each method in turn is of the utmost value in the elucidation of different problems. In discussing such a problem as land tenure, e.g., the historical and comparative method is indispensable; in discussing such a problem as the incidence of taxation the historical and comparative method is useless. Economists are becoming catholic in their methods as well as in their aims.

The economic seminar therefore must train in both methods. The historical and comparative method must be taught by the same canons that are used in the historical seminar. The original material is found in all manner of documents, statutes, decisions, and what not. The student must be shown how to use these documents, how to separate the chaff from the wheat, how to retain the essentials, how to arrange and co-ordinate the facts. The economic seminar is in this respect a historical and comparative workshop. But when we come to the other method, different tactics must be employed. Here the wiser plan is to take up a carefully defined special topic, and to spend a number of consecutive sessions in its examination. The best way to learn to think correctly is to ascertain the flaws in the thoughts of others. Let each student be assigned the works of a definite author or class of authors, so that the whole field of the literature will be parceled out to the class. Let each member bring in his report, which should be both explanatory and critical; let this report be opened to a running fire

of merciless criticism from the other members present; and let the professor in summing up the day's discussion point out wherein the advance, if any, has been made. If this discussion goes on from week to week, it may be assumed that the members will at all events have learned what pitfalls to avoid, what examples to follow. Such a training cannot fail to produce its good results, if they consist in nothing more than the consciousness on the part of the students of their own shortcomings. In the seminar the student for the first time feels himself a man; he occupies the place of the preceptor; he makes his own independent and constructive exposition; but he is spurred on to do his best work by the fear of pitiless criticism and good-natured ridicule. Each successive effort, we may be sure, will be better than the last; and if, after two or three years of such training, the student has not learned how to work, the fault lies not with the seminar but with himself.

But not only does the student derive these advantages from the seminar. The professor is apt to be equally benefited. In the first place the professor learns to unbend himself. In the lecture-room he is the sole arbiter, the oracle. He lays down the law, as he comprehends it. In the seminar he is not the preceptor but the coworker. He puts himself down to the plane of his students. He criticizes them, but must in turn expect to be criticized by them; and the more open and fearless the criticism the better for both. The professor is here the friend, the equal. He leads the discussion, to be sure; but if there are keen, able, bright students present, he may often learn instead of teach. I venture to say, without fear of contradiction, that every successful seminar conductor has frequently received new ideas, novel suggestions, and helpful stimulus for his own particular work. It is this feeling of equality, of meeting on a common fighting-ground, that constitutes one of the most precious features of the seminar. The professor, moreover, is brought into personal and friendly contact with the students—an utter impossibility in the lecture-room. And while on the one hand the student must prize highly the opportunity of intimate converse with the professor, the professor on the other hand is enabled to gauge the merits of each, to give each the needed word of counsel and to form a more definite opinion as a guide in

passing on the candidate's examination and in recommending him for future positions. Finally, the professor will make use of the seminar in advancing his own particular work. His advanced students may be put on the details of the topic in which he is interested; they may be made to do the rough work, so to speak, of original investigation. Their results cannot, indeed, be implicitly relied on, but they will discover a fact here or a new idea there which, when carefully scrutinized, may be welded together into a composite whole. Every successful teacher will use his seminar as a workshop. The handiwork of some may be defective, but he will generally find something that can be turned to good use. A real seminar will, in short, be scarcely less valuable to the professor than to the student.

While the advantages of the seminar are thus plain, its risks and limitations are perhaps in some danger of being overlooked; and this danger is stronger in America than anywhere else.

We energetic Americans, when we get a good thing, are apt to overdo it. College athletics is a good thing; but when professionalism is introduced and educational interests are subordinated to athletic pursuits, it becomes a bad thing. A university is an honored institution; but when we dub every little second-rate college or female seminary a university, we are degrading the title. Higher degrees are in themselves a mark of distinction; but when our minor institutions multiply these high degrees and grant them for absurdly inadequate work, all degrees tend to lose their value and significance. So in the same way with the seminar. The seminar is a strictly university method. When an attempt is made to introduce these methods into the college, the academy, and the high school, not only is it an abuse which will be utterly useless or worse than useless for the student, but one which will tend to cast discredit on the idea itself. The project of extending the benefits of the seminar to other than university students is a well-meaning, but utterly mistaken notion.

The reason is obvious: the seminar is an adjunct to specialization; but specialization, as we have already indicated, is the work of the university, not of the college or high school. The great danger with higher education in America is that university ideas

may be pushed down to manifestly unfit places. Even in the college, the elective system is a good thing only if its operation be carefully restricted. An absolutely free election which would enable a young man to spend all his time in college on a single topic involves a radical confusion of ideas. It would not be a college education, because it would not be a general education, the education befitting a gentleman. It would not be a university education, because the student is not old enough to profit by the university methods. Absolutely free election, in the sense indicated, would ruin the college and would also ruin the university; for when university professors are compelled to expound their ideas to immature boys, they are inevitably compelled to degrade their work to the level of their students. The real university course presupposes a certain general foundation; and if this foundation is lacking, the course loses half of its usefulness.

But if specialization is unfit work for the college and high school, to a still greater extent is the seminar absolutely unsuitable for the college and high school. The seminar connotes original research; college students have neither the maturity nor the training which are necessary prerequisites to independent thinking. The seminar implies a certain equality between student and preceptor; the college boy is a manifestly absurd equal for his professor. The seminar imports the use of the co-operative method; but how can students, whose linguistic and literary equipment is necessarily of the slightest, successfully employ the arts of comparison and criticism? The seminar involves the employment of the most advanced pedagogical methods; but advanced methods can be used only with advanced students.

To attempt to employ university methods with immature youths would be even worse than to endanger the cause of university education by pushing it down into the college. The seminar in the college would be useless and worse than useless. It would be useless because minds in a formative state cannot create. That which is itself being created cannot produce. Any attempt to construct something new would simply result in a parrot-like repetition of the old.

But the seminar in the college would be worse than useless;

it would be positively deleterious. It would injure the student, because it would lead him to understand that he is doing original work, when he is only rehashing the work of others. It would foster habits of superficiality and of vainglory. To use an agronomic term, it would lead to extensive, not to intensive, culture. A diet of meat is a very excellent thing; but during certain years of our existence we are fed not on meat but on milk. The attempt prematurely to substitute solids for liquids is as perilous in the intellectual, as in the physical, development. The seminar, moreover, would react on the morale, not only of the student, but also of the teacher. No self-respecting teacher who comprehends what a seminar means could continue to employ these methods with immature boys without becoming conscious that he is untrue to his mission. He pretends to be doing what he knows cannot be done. He is dissipating his energies without accomplishing any positive result, except that of more or less conscious deception. And finally the seminar in the college and high school is worse than useless, because it would tend to discredit the whole institution. The public would be led to believe that the high-school seminar was the genuine article; and the force of public opinion might in the long run degrade the university seminar to the plane of its educational congener. The tendency of unbridled democracy in education, as in politics, is not to pull the average up to the level of the best, but to pull the best down to the level of the average.

Let us strive, therefore, to live up to the ideal. Let us set our standard high and cling to it unflinchingly. If the seminar is such a potent engine for good, let us develop its possibilities and give free scope to its opportunities. But let us beware of attempting to use it where it ought not to be used; let us beware of emasculating its energy and degrading its position. Let us beware of the misguided zeal which destroys what it endeavors to upbuild. Let us render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and let us recognize the danger of applying university methods to non-university conditions.

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